

Wheeler

National Wildlife Refuge

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Refuge Facts

- Established: 1938.
- Acres: 34,500.
- Satellite refuges: Blowing Rock National Wildlife Refuge, 264 acres (habitat for endangered gray and Indiana bats); Fern Cave National Wildlife Refuge, 199 acres (habitat for endangered gray and Indiana bats, threatened American hart's tongue fern); Key Cave National Wildlife Refuge, 1,060 acres (habitat for endangered Alabama cavefish and gray bat); Watercress Darter National Wildlife Refuge, seven acres (habitat for endangered watercress darter).
- Location: the refuge is located between Decatur and Huntsville in the Tennessee River Valley of northern Alabama.

Natural History

- The first national wildlife refuge ever placed on a multi-purpose reservoir. The area was inhabited by Native Americans in pre-settlement times.
- Supports the southern-most and Alabama's only significant concentration of wintering Canada geese (Southern James Bay Population).
- Bottomland hardwoods, moist soil units, riparian woodlands, back water embayments, pine uplands, and croplands provide habitat for a diversity of wildlife.

Financial Impact of Refuge

- 17-person staff.
- 700,000 visitors annually.
- Current year budget (FY 98) \$978,000.

Refuge Objectives

- Provide wintering habitat for migratory waterfowl consistent with the overall plan of the Mississippi Flyway Council.
- Provide optimum habitat for a wide diversity of game and nongame birds, both resident and migratory, and for mammals, reptiles, and amphibians.
- Provide optimum habitat and maximum protection for endangered and threatened species.
- Provide wildlife-oriented recreation and interpretive opportunities to the public.

Management Tools

- Water level management.
- Cooperative farming.
- Forest management.
- Community partnerships.
- Law enforcement.
- Education/interpretation.
- Prescribed fire.

Public Use Opportunities

- Visitor center with class room, conference room, interpretive exhibits, and auditorium.
- Wildlife observation building.
- Environmental education programs.
- Five interpretive foot trails.
- Volunteer program.
- Fishing and hunting.
- Boating.
- Hiking.
- Bicycling.
- Photography.
- Handicap accessible fishing pier.
- Handicap accessible hunting.

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Calendar of Events

March: Federal Junior Duck Stamp Contest.

May: Youth Fishing Rodeo, FAWN Festival.

Summer: Wheeler Day Camp.

August: United Way's Day of Caring Fishing Rodeo.

October: Wet and Wild Festival, Southern Wildlife Festival.

Questions and Answers

What is there to see and do at Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge?

Wheeler offers a variety of recreational opportunities including a Visitor Center, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, fishing, hunting, hiking, boating, and educational interpretive programs. A wildlife observation building provides visitors an opportunity to view various types of wildlife. From November through February, thousands of ducks and geese use the display pool adjacent to the building. Butterflies and hummingbirds are attracted to the blooming flowers in the backyard wildlife area during spring, summer, and fall months. The refuge offers five hiking trails ranging in length from 200 yards to 2 miles. Six improved boat launch areas provide access to the Tennessee River (Wheeler Reservoir) and several of its tributaries. Bank fishing opportunities also exist.

When is the best time to visit the refuge?

Fall, winter, and spring are typically the best times to visit the refuge in terms of weather and wildlife sightings. Fall brings migrating flocks of ducks and geese along with the peak of the warbler migration during October. Winter months are the best time to see the largest concentrations of ducks and geese. During spring, wildflowers and migrating songbirds are commonly seen. Summer months are typically more hot and humid with less wildlife visible during the day. Fishing for bass, bluegill, and catfish is fairly good during the summer.

Where is the best place to go to see wildlife?

The wildlife observation building, located near the Visitor Center, is one of the best places to view large concentrations of ducks and geese during winter months and butterflies and hummingbirds in spring, summer and fall. Bird feeders placed in the backyard wildlife area attract birds year round. Various songbirds, mammals, amphibians, and reptiles may be seen along any of the five hiking trails.

Are there alligators at Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge?

Although seldom seen, American alligators do inhabit the refuge. In the 1970's, the alligator population had been reduced drastically, so 50 alligators were released here in efforts to help restore the species which at that time was federally listed as threatened. An estimated 40-50 alligators currently inhabit Wheeler Refuge and at least one active nest was located during the summer of 1998.